

Professional Routines and Rules in News Writing

Katariina Ruohomäki
University of Vaasa
Finland

1. Introduction

"In my opinion, the professionalism of a journalist is evaluated by us journalists ourselves. We are the professionals of news writing. It often happens that an outsider tries to tell us how things should be done. That's how conflicts come about."

(from an interview with a journalist)

Most people know how to read news stories, but it takes a professional to write them. Bell (1991: 147) states that journalists are the professional story-tellers of our age. According to Tuchman (1978: 66), journalistic professionalism is knowing how to write a story that meets organizational standards and formal conventions. These conventions and routines in media practice form a set of rules and are an integral part of media professionalism (Shoemaker & Reese 1996: 106).

This paper explores descriptive features of professionalism in news writing in a provincial Finnish newspaper, *Pohjalainen*. The purpose of this paper is to describe professionalism in journalistic writing as well as some of the professional conventions concerning story writing. The aim is to investigate, on one hand, how the professional journalistic writers feel about existing conventions in news writing, and, on the other hand, what professional, unwritten rules there are concerning news writing and especially designing a headline. Special attention is paid to headlines, since almost half of the comments on rules that appeared in the interviews were concerned with headlines. The other comments were about lead, captions, and speech quotations.

The paper is based on a larger study that investigates rules and conventions of news writing from a journalist's point of view. The study may be of help in clarifying why news stories are written the way they are. Furthermore, as Hvitfelt (1988: 113)

emphasizes, in order to understand how journalism works, one should understand how the language of journalism works.

2. Material and method

Data for the study were collected by interviewing four journalists of the newspaper *Pohjalainen* in May 2001. The journalists were selected on the ground that they were experienced journalists who worked as news reporters. The subjects averaged 46 years of age, and their average experience of journalistic work was 22 years. Two women and two men were interviewed and they were ensured anonymity.

Before the interviews two news stories extracted from *Pohjalainen* were telefaxed to the subjects and the subjects were asked to have a look at the stories before the interview. During the interview, the news stories were used on one hand as a source for real-life examples, and on the other hand as a target for comments and criticism. The interviews were conducted as focused interviews for which an interview guide was designed beforehand. The duration of an interview was on the average one hour, and all interviews took place on the premises of the newspaper *Pohjalainen*. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

The interviews were analyzed according to a phenomenographical method. Phenomenography means describing a phenomenon through a person's individual conceptions of a phenomenon (cf. e.g. Ahonen 1996), and the purpose of my study was to examine journalists' ideas of the professional routines and rules in news writing.

Earlier studies have investigated rules of journalistic work (e.g. Rentola 1983; Reunanen 1991), but the focus has been primarily on the norms and conventions that are found in **textbooks** for journalists, and the perspective has been sociological (Tuchman 1978). The present study differs from earlier approaches in that it has a linguistic perspective and that it investigates conventions concerned with **news writing** from the point of view of journalists.

3. Professionalism in news writing

For a journalist, the ability to write news stories is a professional skill that has been learned through years of practice (Tuchman 1978). According to Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 71), people who think they can write often think they would also make good journalists. However, according to Torrance (1996), writing expertise is highly dependent upon knowledge of the genre. Consequently, expert writers should be seen as writers who have the skill to efficiently produce **the same kind of text** many times (Torrance 1996, boldface K.R.). Therefore, journalists are experts in their own genre, news discourse.

3.1 Convention in story structure: the inverted pyramid

Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 6–7, 114) state that media content is influenced by media routines, the way in which for example journalists organize their work. Story

structure is one of the most enduring media routines. In news writing, one of the key concepts is **the inverted pyramid**, the top-down principle of relevance, which means that the most important information is put first and then the rest is organized in descending order of importance (see also for example van Dijk 1988: 43; Parsigian 1992). Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 110–111) point out that a routine such as the inverted pyramid structure may serve both audience and organization requirements. Firstly, the audience can stop reading the story after the first paragraphs and secondly, the stories are easily edited and cut from the bottom since the least important information is written at the end of the story.

Tuchman (1978: 105) suggests that, for a journalist, professionalism means the ability to rise above the accepted norms such as the inverted pyramid and still write a story that builds drama. "Professionalism may mean breaking those rules that serve as bibles for hacks", Tuchman (1978: 105) states.

This is congruent with the view of Bhatia (1998: 14–15), who argues that the expert members of a discourse community are likely to exploit the conventions and constraints of a genre in order to achieve special effects. Furthermore, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993: 476) emphasize that special attention should be paid to the ways in which genre users manipulate genres for particular rhetorical purposes.

Routines may be seen as means to an end, but often these means become institutionalized and take on a life of their own (Shoemaker & Reese 1996: 106). Although routines are required in efficient news production, they may have an effect on the **information content** of the stories when the information is forced into a certain form (Mörä 1996: 105, 113). As critical discourse analysts suggest, particular ways of writing tend to turn into conventions and texts into routines (cf. e.g. Fairclough 1992). Therefore, it is important to question and to explore the function and the origin of the routines such as the inverted pyramid structure.

In order to explore the reporters' ideas concerning the structural norms, I will here concentrate on their comments on the inverted pyramid and the structure of a news story. Typical of the comments was a reluctance to obey any structural norms, as shown in examples 1, 2 and 3. One subject even compared the norms to a straitjacket.

Example 1. Jos mulla pitäis olla joku tietty rakenne, niin mä olisin heti ihan kuin köytettynä.

[If I was forced to follow a certain structure, I would feel as if I was in a straitjacket.]

Example 2. Rakenteet on tehty tuhottavaksi.

[Structures are made to be destroyed.]

Example 3. Mieluummin mä tekisin sen omalla tavallani.

[I would rather do it my own way.]

Examples 4 and 5 demonstrate the reporters' opinion about the **purpose** of the inverted pyramid. The subjects think that the inverted pyramid is a guide line meant for novices and that experienced journalists are more creative. Breaking the structural rules is even seen as a condition for talented writing.

Example 4. Aloittelija ehkä ajattelee, ettei ole olemassa kuin yksi tyyppi tehdä juttuja. Mutta onko se hyvä tyyppi, mitä noudatetaan? Ja ehkä aloittelijalle on hyvä olla olemassa jonkinlaiset raamit, jota noudatetaan. Mutta mitä enemmän sä kirjoitat juttuja ja luet muitten juttuja, sä näet, että mitään rakenteita ei ole.

[A beginner might think that there's only one way to build up a story, but is it the best one? Maybe it's good for the beginners to have a certain frame to start from. But the more stories you write stories and the more you read others' stories, the better you realize that there are no structures.]

Example 5. Ja jos ei sellaiseen anneta mahdollisuutta, että saa lähteä puhtaalta pöydältä, silloin kun ei ole kyse tulipalouutisesta, niin ei koskaan löydetä niitä toimittajahelmiä.

[Sometimes you should give a beginner a free hand to write a story, let him write the story without any constraints, at least when it's news of immediate urgency. If you don't let him do that, the true journalist talents will never be found.]

One of the interviewees (example 6) states that the purpose of the inverted pyramid structure is to satisfy a reader's interests. Yet, the reporter is not pleased with the idea that the reader might read only the lead of the story.

Example 6. Niinku mä sulle sanoin, niin mieluummin mä tekisin sen omalla tavallani, mutta tää malli palvelee lukijaa, koska se on tässä alkupäässä se asia. Ei tarvi sitten lukea enempää. Niin kurjasti sitä ajatellaan. Kyllä mä sen hyväksyn, mutta se ei oo aina kivaa.

[I would rather do it my way, but you have to take the reader into consideration. You have to write what is most essential at the beginning of the story, because the reader might not read any further. I accept this but it doesn't feel nice.]

The inverted pyramid is compared to a pillar (example 7) that one can use when there is lack of time or ideas. Moreover, modifying the story structure is seen as a stylistic device, as a special effect. Nevertheless, using such effects requires special skills, as example 8 indicates.

Example 7. Jos ei tunne luovuutensa riittävän, ei jaksa keksiä mitään tai aika vaan ei riitä, niin se on ihan hyvä keino. Jalka jolla seistä, jonkinlainen tukipilari.

[If you don't feel creative or have enough time, or any ideas, then you can use the pyramid. The pyramid is like a pillar. Still, a good journalist can abandon the pyramid.]

Example 8. Mutta sitten tietysti tehokeinoina voi käyttää myös jollain tapaa sellaista rikottua rakennetta, mutta se on silloin hallittua ja hallitusti rikottua. [However, there are some effects you can use, you can break the structure, but you have to do so in a controlled manner.]

One interviewee (example 9) compares structural norms to a box and to frames inside within journalists are supposed to operate. However, the reporter suggests that the best news stories are often written "outside the box". On one hand, journalists are not allowed to break the walls of the box, but on the other hand, successfully broken rules may lead to a good news story.

Example 9. Jokasella ammattialalla on olemassa sellanen laatikko, sellaset raamit, sellaiset kehykset, joissa toimitaan. Ja niiden kehysten rikkominen tällaisissa tavallisissa, kuivissa uutisjutuissa on vaikeesti hallittavaissa. Jos siitä laatikosta meinaa tulla tällaisissa kuivissa jutuissa ulos, niin se on aika vaativaa eikä siinä rutiini ja nopeus auta. Joskus, kun näkee jotain sellaista, että ollaan tultu sieltä laatikosta ulos ja koitetaankin lähestyä jollain toisella tapaa sitä asiaa, niin kyllä ne on lukujuttuja. Jos onnistuu, saa kehuja. Siitä saa kovat moitteet, jos epäonnistuu.

[Every profession has a certain frame, like a box, inside which you have to operate. And crossing that line when writing an ordinary, dull news story is quite difficult and demanding even though you are fast and you know the routine. But sometimes, when you see a story like that, written outside the frame, it is a great story. Story of the day. But if you fail, you will be heavily criticized.]

Only one of the reporters (example 10) does not criticize the principle of the inverted pyramid. According to the journalist, the principle is justified on the ground that the journalists are **taught** to use the structure.

Example 10. No onhan sitä meille opetettu, millainen rakenteen pitää olla. Alusta pitää heti käydä ilmi, mistä on kysymys ja sitten asiat tulee sujuvasti tärkeysjärjestyksessä. Ei siitä mallista voi tinkiä.

[Sure we've been taught what the structure should be like. It should be clear at the very outset what the story is all about and then the rest is presented fluently and in order of importance. You can't compromise with this pattern.]

Therefore, the professional idea of the structure of a news story is rather inconsistent with the definitions in different textbooks of journalism that introduce the idea of the inverted pyramid as a rule of thumb. On the other hand, these conclusions seem to be consonant with Tuchman's (1978) idea of professionalism as the ability to break the rules. The inverted pyramid is seen as a pillar for beginners, whereas experienced journalists are more likely to break the rules successfully. Similar results have been found in Koskela's (2000: 31) research on philosophers as professional writers, where talented writing was seen as the ability to free oneself from the conventions of the genre.

3.2. Conventions in writing a headline

In the second part of this paper I describe the rules in news writing that came up during the interviews. The reporters list various norms and rules in news writing that they think should be followed, or that the house style requires them to follow, and special attention was drawn to headlines. The other comments are about lead, captions, and speech quotations. Henceforth, these rules are called unwritten personal rules.

There is plenty of guidance for designing a good headline in the textbooks for journalists (see e.g. Okkonen 1986; Larsson 1989; Huovila 1996). The books advise journalists to avoid punctuation, long words, slang, and passive forms in headlines. Okkonen (1986: 248) compares language in headlines to language in posters: it is clear, fresh, active, and unambiguous. There are also graphical demands in designing a headline, since headlines are often made to fill a certain space in the newspaper. According to Larsson (1989: 165), headlines are usually divided into two or three lines.

According to Oestreicher (1991: 56), captions, subheadings and headlines have a special function in capturing the reader's attention. A recent study by Nordman (2000: 210-211) reports that from a journalist's point of view, a good headline is accurate, alluring, and informative. Furthermore, a good headline is in line with the facts of the news story. There are also some requirements of form, for example avoiding hyphenating in headlines.

The comments of the interviewees are mainly concerned with the form and layout of headlines. Firstly, there are personal rules about the **length** of a headline as seen in examples 11 and 12.

Example 11. Mä pyrin siihen, että otsikko on aina kahdella rivillä.
[I try to divide headlines into two lines.]

Example 12. Mä yritän mahduttaa sen 30 kirjaimen kuudelle palstalle.
[I try to put it in 30 letters in six columns.]

When the journalists are asked about the motives for these rules, one of them argues that the rules are needed for the reader, and that it pleases the journalist as well (example 13).

Example 13. Jos se on liian raskas kuudella palstalla, niin se alkaa niinkun vuotaa se otsikko. Sillä lailla niin sä et saa kiinni siitä ajatuksesta, toisin kun sellasesta napakasta kolmen sanan, yhden rivin otsikosta. Se on mulle sellainen periaate.
[If the headline in six columns is too heavy, it starts to leak in a way, and the reader does not get the point. Three words in six columns, on one line, that's the way I like it.]

The majority of personal rules are concerned with the form of headlines. On the **syntactic level** there are requirements concerning the punctuation and the use of speech quotations in headlines, as example 14 shows.

Example 14. Ja sitten mä en sulata otsikoissa pilkkuja enkä viivoja enkä mitään ylimääräisiä välimerkkejä enkä lainauksia.

[I don't like it if there is any punctuation in the headline or any speech quotations or any dashes.]

Hvitfelt (1988: 125) states that headlines are often in the form of a speech quotation, when something is expressed in the words of a source, a person that has been interviewed for the news story. In Hvitfelt's (1988) view, a headline put in quotation marks indicates that the statement of the cited source is not regarded as objective or impartial. On the contrary, the information given in quotation marks can even be uncertain or inaccurate. Nevertheless, in my research the interviewees give different reasons for avoiding speech quotations. The common opinion is that putting text in quotation marks is too easy. Subjects state that it is a journalist's duty to edit the material, not to repeat it in quotation marks. Using speech quotations is seen as an indication of laziness, as example 15 demonstrates.

Example 15. On huono juttu, jos on liikaa lainauksia. Mä arvostan sitä, että toimittaja on nähnyt vaivaa ja valinnut lukijan puolesta keskeisimmät asiat, nostanu asioita esille. Eikä luetteloinu niitä suoria lainauksia peräperään sellaiseksi mössöksi.

[You should not have too many speech quotations. If the story consists of one speech quotation after another, the journalist has not taken the trouble to analyze and to specify what the story is all about.]

Some of the rules deal with **lexical choices**. Examples 16 and 17 indicate that the journalists' ideas are in consonance with those mentioned in textbooks, for example in favouring short words and active verbs.

Example 16. Otsikossa on vaan lyhyitä sanoja. Ei yhdyssanoja.

[The headline should have only short words, no compound words.]

Example 17. Pitää olla aktiivinen verbi otsikossa.

[There has to be an active verb in the headline.]

Personal rules also involve opinions about the **layout** of headlines, as examples 18 and 19 demonstrate. This implies that, at least from a professional point of view, headlines have an aesthetic function as well, in other words headlines should look good in a graphical sense.

Example 18. Ja sitten ihannehan olisi, että esirivi olisi yhtä pitkä (kuin otsikko).

[And the ideal layout is that the subheadline is as long as the main headline.]

Example 19. Mun mielestä näitä (alaotsikoita) ei edes tarvittaisi lehdessä, mutta nää on nyt muotiasia. Ehkä tää auttaa alkukappaleasioissa. Että jos joku ei vaikka jaksakaan lukea edes alkukappaletta, niin onpa ainakin kaksi otsikkoa.

[In my opinion, all we need is the main headlines. The subheadlines are just a fashion statement, a trend. Maybe the subheadlines help when you're writing the lead. You just think that if someone doesn't even bother to read the first paragraph, then at least there are two headlines to read.]

Remarkably, only one of the comments is about the **information content** of the headline. This might be attributed to the fact that it is easier to tackle the question of form than that of information content. Example 20 is an illustration of a convention that combines informative and graphical requirements, in other words the joint effect of the headline and the possible photo illustrating the story.

Example 20. Ja ihan jatkuvasti pitäis puuttua otsikointiin ja siihen, miten kuva ja otsikko pelaa keskenään.

[It is not appropriate if the photo says one thing and the headline something else. They should be in harmony.]

To summarize, the reporters have specific conventions concerning the form of headlines, whereas the information content is not much commented on. The professional personal rules seem to be quite similar to those found in the textbooks when it comes to avoiding compound words and punctuation in headlines. However, there are conventions that are not found in the textbooks, for instance precise ideas about the length and layout of headlines. Personal conventions are mainly justified with a professional view, with statements such as "in my opinion" and "I don't like it", but readers were taken into consideration as well. The conventions are a part of the tacit knowledge of professional journalistic work, and, as Kunelius (1998: 217) points out, these norms are not written in textbooks but learnt in the daily work routine by imitating the older professionals. Yet, it appears that the professional conventions in news writing are personal rather than typical of the journalists of a certain newspaper, since there are individual differences between personal journalistic conventions.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this research imply that journalists as professional writers are reluctant to follow existing rules such as the inverted pyramid structure. In spite of this, they seem to have quite definite personal conventions in writing a headline. In conclusion, it would appear that professionalism in news writing includes both observing the rules and deliberately breaking them.

Furthermore, it seems that expertise in news writing is gained through years of practice. This is indicated by the fact that professionals make comparisons in writing skills between beginners and experienced journalists. Existing conventions are considered as tools for beginners whereas experienced journalists know how to

break the rules and still write a good story. Hence, professionalism in journalistic writing includes exploiting generic conventions, as Bhatia (1998) suggests. The reporters do not take for example structural conventions for granted. On the contrary, the journalists question the conventions and find their own ways to capture the reader's interest. In addition, it appears that experienced journalistic writers tend to develop individual conventions that are different from the ones that other reporters observe. Thus, generic conventions seem to depend less on a certain newspaper or a house style.

In future research, the professional perspective in news writing could be further investigated by making comparisons between trainees and experienced journalists. That might be of help in exploring how professional skills develop during the career of a journalist.

5. References

- Ahonen, S. (1996). Fenomenografinen tutkimus. In: *Laadullisen tutkimuksen työtapoja*, 113–160. L. Syrjälä, S. Ahonen, E. Syrjäläinen & S. Saari (eds). Helsinki: Kirjayhtymä.
- Bell, A. (1991). *The Language of News Media*. Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- Berkenkotter, C. & T.N. Huckin (1993). Rethinking Genre From a Sociocognitive Perspective. In: *Written Communication* 4/1993, 457–509.
- Bhatia, V.K. (1998). *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. London & New York: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Huovila, T. (1996). *Toimittaja - vastuussa oleellisesta muutoksesta*. Jyväskylä: Yliopistopaino.
- Hvitfelt, H. (1988). Om den journalistiska formens betydelse. In: *Forskning om journalistik*. En antologi från Nordicom-Sverige, 107–131. U. Carlsson (ed.). Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Koskela, M. (2000). *Svenska som filosofins språk*. Proceedings of the University of Vaasa, research papers 235. Vasa.
- Kunelius, R. (1998). Modernin myyntitykit. Journalistisen professionaalisuuden pulmat ja haasteet. In: *Viestinnän jäljillä*. Näkökulmia uuden ajan ilmiöön, 207–229. U. Kivikuru & R. Kunelius (eds.). Juva: WSOY.
- Larsson, S. (1989). *Att skriva i tidning*. Om grunderna för reporterns arbete. Stockholm: Legend.
- Luostarinen, H. (1996). Citizen Kane ja infokratia. Kriitikot, motiivit ja keinot. In: *Sopulisilppuri*. Mediakritiikin näkökulmia, 11–40. H. Luostarinen, U. Kivikuru & M. Ukkola (eds.). Jyväskylä: Gummerus.
- Nordman M. (2000). Rubriker som frågor. In: *Svenskan i Finland 5*. Föredrag vid femte sammankomsten för beskrivningen av svenskan i Finland, 203–214. K. Keski-Raasakka & P. Söderholm (eds.). Joensuu: Joensuun yliopistopaino.
- Möra, T. (1996). Journalistit rutiinien verkossa. In: *Sopulisilppuri*. Mediakritiikin näkökulmia, 105–116. H. Luostarinen, U. Kivikuru & M. Ukkola (eds.). Jyväskylä: Gummerus.
- Oestreicher, A. (1991). *Texthantering på tidningsredaktioner*. Redigeringsorganisatoriska ramar i svensk dagspress. FUMS rapport nr 159. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet.

- Okkonen, A. (1986). *Toimittajan työ I*. Hämeenlinna: Karisto.
- Parsigian, E.K. (1992). *Mass Media Writing*. Hillsdale etc.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rentola, I. (1983). *Normaalijournalismin säännöt*. Yhdysvaltalaisen journalismin oppikirjallisuuden esittämän ideaalityypin tarkastelua. Tampereen yliopiston tiedotusopin laitoksen julkaisuja, sarja A 47. Tampere: Tampereen yliopisto.
- Reunanen, E. (1991). *Merkitysympäristö ja uutisgenren säännöt*. Tampereen yliopiston tiedotusopin laitoksen julkaisuja, sarja A 76. Tampere: Tampereen yliopisto.
- Shomaker, P.J. & S.D. Reese (1996). *Mediating the message*. Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content. New York: Longman Publishers.
- Torrance, M. (1996). Is writing expertise like other kinds of expertise? In: *Theories, Models and Methodology in Writing Research*, 3–9. G. Rijlaarsdam, H. van der Bergh & M. Couzjin (eds.). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Making News*. A Study in the Construction of Reality. London & New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers.
- van Dijk, T.A. (1988). *News as Discourse*. Hillsdale etc.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

ABSTRACT

Professional Routines and Rules in News Writing

Katariina Ruohomäki
University of Vaasa
Finland

The aim of this paper is to explore the professional conventions in news writing in a Finnish provincial newspaper, *Pohjalainen*. The present study concentrates especially on the existing routines in news writing as well as on the unwritten, personal rules that the journalists apply when designing the story structure and writing a headline. Data for the study were collected by interviewing four experienced news reporters of the newspaper *Pohjalainen* and the interviews were analyzed in a phenomenographical framework. The results of the research indicate that the reporters are reluctant to follow existing rules concerning the story structure, such as the inverted pyramid principle, although the rule is widely recommended in textbooks for journalists. Exploiting the structural conventions was even seen as a condition for successful writing. On the other hand, journalists have a number of personal, professional conventions in writing a headline. Hence, it would appear that professionalism in news writing includes both unconsciously and consciously following the rules and deliberately breaking them.
